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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001668

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/29/2026  
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [OSCE](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: GOT PLANS TO RENOVATE CHURCHES, SYNAGOGUE

REF: 05 ANKARA 2750

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Classified by Polcouns Janice G. Weiner; reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (U) ConGen Istanbul contributed to this report.

¶2. (C) Summary: The GOT's Directorate General for Foundations (DGF) is planning to renovate seven historic churches and a synagogue this year, marking the first time the agency has renovated non-Muslim places of worship. Christian and Jewish representatives view this as a positive, though symbolic, step. End Summary.

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Renovations Planned for 2006  
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¶3. (U) Yusuf Beyazit, DGF director, told us March 28 that the DGF plans to renovate seven churches -- including Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac, and Catholic facilities -- and a synagogue in 2006. The projects would mark the first time the DGF has renovated non-Muslim places of worship in its 82-year history.

¶4. (U) The DGF expropriates non-Muslim foundations, and their affiliated properties, when the size of the non-Muslim population in a particular district dwindles. The agency also administers a large number of Muslim foundations expropriated after the secular Republic was established in 1923; non-Muslim foundations comprise only a tiny portion of the 41,550 organizations controlled by the DGF.

¶5. (C) Many of the DGF-administered properties are rent-generating, providing the agency with its operating funds. Beyazit said the church and synagogue renovations are now possible thanks to major improvements in the DGF's rent-collection system. In the past, the agency failed to collect most of the revenue it was due, and could only afford two or three renovation projects a year. Improved collections have enabled the agency over the past couple of years to increase this rate to more than 700 projects a year; the church and synagogue projects will be among approximately 750 planned for 2006. "All of the properties we administer

are part of our heritage," Beyazit said. "We do not discriminate against any of them." The properties scheduled for renovation are all under DGF control.

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Religious Minorities Appreciate Gesture  
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¶6. (C) Turkey's religious minorities have long been critical of the DGF and the practice of expropriating foundations. Nevertheless, representatives of the Armenian Orthodox and Jewish communities say they consider the renovations a positive, if limited, step. Armenian Orthodox Patriarch Mesrob II told reporters the renovations are a "demonstration of goodwill" and said he hopes such efforts continue. Lina Filiba, executive vice president of the Jewish Community of Turkey, told us the DGF effort is "positive and encouraging."

Still, she said, it is a symbolic gesture -- the DGF will renovate a synagogue in Edirne, where there are no longer any Jews left to worship. Filiba said the property could serve as an historical site for visitors. The Jewish Community has been cooperating with the DGF on the project, though it is "not a cooperation among equals," she said.

¶7. (C) Metropolitan Meliton of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was more skeptical about the renovation plans. He noted to us that the Greek Orthodox properties slated for renovation are among those the Patriarchate sought to reclaim under recent reform legislation, only to be turned down by the DGF.

He added that the DGF never contacted the Patriarchate to discuss the plans, which he learned about from the media and an acquaintance affiliated with one of the churches.

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Comment - Much-Needed Goodwill  
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¶8. (C) We have met with Beyazit frequently to discuss the expropriation of non-Muslim properties. Though he is a staunch defender of the status quo system, he appears sincere in his efforts to improve relations between the Turkish state and the religious minorities. These renovations should generate some much-needed goodwill. Further improvements may be on the horizon if the GOT follows through on its commitment to pass a new law on foundations by July, though earlier drafts of the bill indicate it will have a limited impact (reftel).

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